DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 934 RC 010 694

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TITLE Assisting the Rural Poor Escape Poverty.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 16p.; Paper prepared for the Rural Sociological Society Meeting (San Francisco, California, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Budgeting; Eating Habits; *Economic Disadvantagement; *Extension Education; Home Management; Housewives; *Nutrition Instruction; *Paraprofessional Personnel; Poverty Programs; Rural Extension; *Rural Population; Self Help Programs; Volunteer Training
IDENTIFIERS *Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program; Missouri

ABSTRACT

Evaluation of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program as an antipoverty strategy was undertaken in 1977 by examining activities of paraprofessional Nutrition Education Assistants (NEA's) in the Ozark Foothills area of Missouri to determine how they helped their clientele families become self-sufficient and integrated into the mainstream of society. Previous studies had looked essentially at the program's internal effectiveness, not at its effectiveness in helping rural poor escape poverty. Data for 179 families who had participated in the program about two years showed that while only five percent had escaped poverty or were on their way, all but 31 families were making progress. Of the five percent, more than half had obtained better paying, more secure jobs through further education. Twenty-five percent had made some improvement in eating patterns by switching to home-cooked meals and eliminating snack foods; 34 percent had improved their diets by growing their own vegetables and, in some cases, raising livestock; 35 families had begun to pay off accumulated debts or were making home improvements. Paraprofessional help through encouragement, budget training, and involving homemakers as volunteer leaders were cited as vital to the progress made, and effectiveness of the program could be tied to helping families help themselves. (RS)

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ASSISTING THE RURAL POOR ESCAPE POVERTY**

John S. Holik & C. Diane Schryer*

Introduction

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) is a federally initiated response to the concern for poor food consumption of low income families in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The program was introduced in 1968 as a response to a 1965[1] report which indicated that "nearly 40 percent of the households with incomes under $3,000 had poor diets."[2] Our study is concerned with the question, is EFNEP helping low-income people ameliorate the effects of poverty and how does it help rural poor families escape poverty?

Missouri's EFNEP began operation in January, 1969 in five locations: East-West Gateway, Kansas City, Bootheel, Mid-Missouri and the Ozark Foothills areas. By 1970, the program expanded to include Kaysinger Basin, Mark Twain, ABCD, Ozark Gateway, Show-ME, Lakes Country area, and South Central Ozarks.

The basic goal of EFNEP is to improve the adequacy of diets of low-income families with children.[3] Since 1969 the program goals have been broadened to include the following specific objectives:

1. To increase knowledge of the relationship of nutrition to health and well being;
2. To increase food buying skills to insure maximum value from the dollars invested in food;

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** Paper prepared for 1978 Rural Sociological Society Meeting in San Francisco, California.

3. To develop food preparation skills in order to serve palatable meals and insure maximum preservation of food with minimum waste;

4. To develop skills in the care and storage of the family food supply;

5. To encourage eligible families to participate in the Food Stamp or Commodity Food Program;

6. To increase the ability of the family to manage the family resources including Food Stamps or Commodity Foods.[4]

The activities of the paraprofessionals further expanded EFNEP services through providing immediate needs care, referrals and personal encouragement. The nature of the goals seems to address the poverty question.

As an anti-poverty strategy the EFNEP would be classified by Williamson[5] as an education approach. A fundamental assumption of the strategy is "that poverty cannot be adequately dealt with without provisions for the long run self-sufficiency of those who are poor."[6] "The education approach assumes that it is desirable to integrate the poor into the mainstream of society."[7] Williamson pointed out that many of the education programs for the poor recognize that an effective program must take into consideration the poor's needs, such as; food, health care, income, as well as personal counseling. Sar A. Levitan states "Family heads and young people with their life's work ahead of them must have not only mere daily subsistance but also encouragement and support for acquiring the skills sought by employers."[8]

A review of the literature indicates that previous studies of EFNEP were esentially evaluations of the program's internal effectiveness and not with the effectiveness of the program in helping rural poor escape poverty. The main areas of inquiry were:

1. The assessment of the families knowledge of nutrition before and after entrance into the program.
2. Whether there was a change in program participants eating habits resulting in improved nutritional intake.
3. The effectiveness of the educational techniques used in the program.
4. The impact of EFNEP of paraprofessionals.
5. The characteristics of successful versus unsuccessful paraprofessionals.
6. The influence of EFNEP on former paraprofessionals.
7. Investigations of relation between duration of family participation in the program and the amount of dietary improvement.

The following sampling of the publications related to the EFNEP illustrate these seven kinds of studies. The assessment of the operational effectiveness of the Nutrition Program and its methods is reported in the "Program Performance Report of 1971" by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Extension Service.[9]

The effectiveness of EFNEP in reaching the target population and improving their food consumption practices has been described in the Agriculture-Economic Report 220 of 1972: "Impact of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program on Low-income Families."[10]

The role of the paraprofessional was evaluated in "Evaluation of EFNEP, General Conclusions & Recommendations" of 1969 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Extension Service.[11]

Nelso S. Yerka determined the differences between successful and less successful Education Assistants and in a study entitled, "Effectiveness of Paraprofessionals Working With the Low-income Homemakers."[12]

What happened to former paraprofessionals in Nebraska's EFNEP was reported by Kohn, Ahlman, B. Florell in 1975 in "A Follow-up Study of Paraprofessional Aides in Nebraska's Expanded Food and Nutrition Program."[13]

An evaluation of internal effectiveness of EFNEP was conducted in Missouri by Nolan and Gross in 1972.[14]

Miller, Johnson, Smith and Zeller evaluated a pilot program which included early childhood education, health education, youth recreation activities, and community development. This program was designed to alleviate poverty. The authors state that the results were negative because the community discontinued the program, due to its cost and lack of general public support.[15]

We did not find any studies of the impact of the EFNEP on participant families impoverished status. Our review indicates that previous studies primarily addressed the assessment of the program impact on clients diet and the effectiveness of educational methods used.

In this study we were interested in finding out to what extent and how EFNEP assisted participating families escape poverty. The only data we had were the NEA case reports from the five South Central Missouri counties. We used the 233 case reports written by the Nutrition Education Assistants (NEA's) in 1977. Through Content Analysis Techniques we examined the activities of the NEA's to determine how they have helped their clientele families acquire the social and vocational skills necessary for productive living.

The 233 case reports were written by the paraprofessionals to describe to their administrators the activities and problems encountered in trying to teach good nutrition practices to low-income families. The NEA's were instructed to write about one or two families and their situation each month. They were not given any specific instruction on what to

write about in their reports except to describe some of the family situations. These case histories describe how the NEA met the family and what the home situation was like on the initial visit for a few of the cases. For others, further information about the families progress and NEA's activities was also included. Thus, these case histories are not sociological research case studies; instead they are reflections of significant events which the paraprofessional recalled from her experiences with the client family.

The following sections will describe the effectiveness of the EFNEP program in helping poor families become self-sufficient and integrated into the mainstream of society. The report will describe what happened to 179 families after they had participated in the program approximately two years. (54 of the case histories were situational reports of families when they were enrolled into the program) First, we will briefly describe the economic situation in the area. This will be followed by a description of 233 families involved in the study. The next section will describe the progress these families made. The final section will describe how the NEA's brought about the progress.

The Ozark Foothills Area

The Ozark Foothills Area of Missouri consists of Butler, Carter, Reynolds, Ripley and Wayne Counties. This area had a population of 61,862 divided into 16,985 families in 1970.[16] According to the census, 55 percent of these families had incomes of $4,974 or less and approximately one-third, 5,298 had incomes under $3,000 in 1970. Furthermore, only about 45 percent of those in the labor force worked 50-52 weeks, 39 percent worked 26 weeks or less. This points out the lack of full time

employment opportunities. Much of the five county area is national forest land which provides sporadic employment for the unskilled.

Characteristics of EFNEP Families

The age distribution of these families is approximately: 22 percent 19 years of age and under, 38 percent 20-34 years old, 22 percent 35-44 and 18 percent above 45 years of age respectively. Thus, approximately 82 percent of these parents were under 35 years of age.

The number ofchildren per family ranged from expecting first child to 16 children in one family. The mean number of children per family was 2.86.

Fifty-nine or 25 percent of these families were single parent households. Fifty-four were headed by a female and only five by males. Among the female parented families 16 had never married, 13 were divorced, 16 separated, six had been deserted and three widowed. The five male headed families were due to two deaths of the mother and three desertions.

In 22 cases the lack of education was reported to be a problem. Of these 22 cases, 12 were illiterate with less than six years of schooling. Only eight of these had some high school education. There probably were many more cases where either the husband or wife had not completed high school but the NEA did not report this since the amount of education did not become an intervening variable in the families progress.

Employment status among these families at first glance seems to be quite good since only 28 cases of unemployed were reported. When physical and mental health disabilities are considered along with drinking problems the picture changes drastically. In 62 cases the husband was unable to work full time due to his or the wife's incompacitating health problems. In 12 cases the husbands were permanently physically disabled

and in seven others temporarily. In four other cases the men were mentally incapacitated, two unable to work and two somewhat limited. Another 11 men had drinking problems. In 28 of the families the wife was incapacitiated to such an extent that the husband had difficulty working and taking care of her. Out of the 18 ill wives, 8 were unable to do any household tasks. Nine other wives had mental problems limiting their work capacities and another one was an alcholic.

Full time employment was reported by a small proportion of the husbands and wives. Only 30 husbands had year round full time employment, plus 18 wives. In the remainder of the 233 cases employment was mostly in manual labor jobs related to the logging industry and farming. In these jobs many days of work were missed due to weather and the seasonal nature of the work.

These families lived in some of the most dilapidated housing imaginable. Nineteen of them had no running water in the house. One family was living in a tent and another in the back of an old truck. Only 19 of these families reported home ownership.

Family Progress

It is rather difficult to assess the progress of families participating in the EFNEP have made or to determine if what seems to be progress will be permanent. In one case, with the encouragement of the NEA, one man obtained a high school equivalency certificate via examination and then enrolled in the local community college. In 1977, the NEA was surprised to meet him in the grocery store as the manager. In another case, early in 1977 the NEA reported that she had graduated family "X". The husband had conquered his drinking problem and had obtained a secure job. Then about six months later she wrote another case history describing how

this man's wife left him and he had returned to the bottle and thus, she is working with the oldest daughter to help the family.

Out of the 233 case histories, 54 were reports related to the initial visit of the NEA, therefore, the assessment of progress is based upon 179 cases. We determined that among these 179 families 31 had made no progress since they had been enrolled in the program. The NEA's reported that these families hadn't made any changes in their eating habits or housekeeping practices. It should be noted that in four of these cases mental and physical disabilities make progress almost impossible. Also, five of the 31 families were not interested in changing life styles.

In another 44 cases or 25 percent of the families had made some improvement in their eating patterns by switiching to home cooked meals. These families had made some nutritional gain by eliminating the snack foods such as soda pop, candy, potato chips, etc.

Sixty families or approximately 34 percent had improved their diets by learning to grow their own vegetables and in some cases raising livestock for meat. Thus, these families were making some progress both in better nutrition and in reducing costs through home food production and preservation.

Thirty-five families, besides raising most of their own food, have also begun to pay off accumulated debts or are now making improvements on their homes. They learned to follow a budget and are managing their money for further improvement.

Finally, nine or five percent of the families have either escaped poverty or are well on their way. Five of these nine have followed the route of getting more education which has enabled them to obtain better paying and more secure jobs. The other four have overcome marital problems and now are working full time. It is interesting to note that

In all of these nine cases the NEA's encouragement and assistance with budgeting has been cited by these families as a major factor in their progress.

Progress and NEA Activities

These case histories mention encouraging as a primary activity 27 times for the 179 families that made progress. In most instances it was encouragement to either return and finish high school or to get more education (college or vocational training). Encouragement was also part of the activities with the other families, at times to simply provide some stimulus for attending group meetings and learn some new skills.

Budgeting was mentioned in 23 of the cases where the families had made progress. Here we are interpreting budgeting in a restricted manner to mean that the family had developed the skill to keep financial records and make decisions based upon these records. One of the first questions the NEA's ask a new participant is "do you know how much you are spending for food?". This is followed with the suggestions on how to keep a record of expenses. Sometimes this does not result in action by the participating family.

The next major activity mentioned 18 times was involvement of the homemaker to be a volunteer leader to teach others. Related to this was the mention of enrollment of the children into the Green Thumb gardening program 12 times. These two forms of involvement was frequently mentioned by the NEA's in the case histories as being the motivating force in the development of family pride and self confidence. In many of these families, the members, especially the homemakers, are shy and isolated from other

members of the community. Therefore, the NEA will attempt to get the homemaker to attend group meetings, volunteer to have group meetings in her home and then to assist with the Green Thumb activities and finally with teaching others the principles of good nutrition. On some occassions the NEA will invite the homemaker to accompany her on her schedule of visits in the neighborhood and even to Sunday Church services. As these families become more involved with each other they also begin to develop new peer group relations encouraging greater effort in improving their personal and home appearances.

Summary

The EFNEP program had its beginning in the Ozark Foothills Area in 1968. In this conservative area there was public support for the program, since many of the more affluent felt the program would discourage people from disposing of commodity foods in the garbage. In the beginning, the primary goal of the program was to teach the participants how to serve more nutritious meals. The program now is concentrating on low income families with children, to help them maintain more nutritious diets, produce and preserve their own food, and learn how to manage their homes more efficiently.

The paraprofessionals, NEA's, are able to relate to the target audience since they have been employed from their ranks. In many cases they have gained the initial trust and confidence of the participating families by helping them obtain the basic necessities of life. (Food, clothing, shelter, and household furniture) But, as Sar Levitan pointed out these families also "need encouragement and sustaining support for acquiring the skills desired by employers." Our data show that through

the EFNEP program the low income families are receiving the encouragement and support from the paraprofessional via personal visits and group involvement. Our data does not indicate that a high percentage of these families had escaped poverty by the time they are progressed out of the program. Generally, after participating approximately two years, the majority were making progress towards that goal.

One might ask "why is this program as effective as it is?" The answer might be that the NEA is perceived as inquiring about family living patterns, finances, eating habits, etc., for the purpose of helping the families help themselves and not to determine eligibility for obtaining some form of government aid.

FOOTNOTES

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